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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001819

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UNIFICATION MINISTER AND MOFAT: CALM APPROACH ON
KIM JONG-IL AND REQUEST FOR CONSULTATIONS WITH USG

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a September 11 meeting with DASD for Asia David Sedney and EAP/K Director Kurt Tong, Minister of Unification (MOU) Kim Ha-joong said that:

-- the ROKG was being careful to respond to rumors of Kim Jong-il's (KJI) August stroke in a calm manner, to maintain South Koreans' sense of security and to avoid provoking the DPRK;

-- political maneuvering was likely underway beneath the "surface calm" in Pyongyang.

-- more frequent consultations between the USG and ROKG about the DPRK situation are important; and,

-- the PRC (where Kim served as Ambassador) was watching the situation closely and probably thinking ahead to establishing a channel of communication with the new leadership, if it were to emerge.

END SUMMARY.

CALM ROKG REACTION

12. (C) MOU Minister Kim Ha-joong told DASD Sedney that the ROKG was keeping a close eye on developments in the DPRK, while at the same time being cautious in its public statements in order to maintain South Koreans' sense of security and to avoid provoking the North. Kim -- whose face was omnipresent on Korean and international television that morning after he told the National Assembly that the ROKG did not have definite information about KJI -- said that the ROKG was working hard to ensure that the public remained calm in the face of strong evidence that KJI had suffered a stroke. He noted as a positive factor that people remember Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 did not lead to instability on the Korean Peninsula.

13. (C) Kim said that beneath the surface calm in Pyongyang there must be "confusion" and political jockeying. Kim agreed with Sedney that the opacity of the DPRK political system meant that it would be difficult to track the leadership struggle from outside. Kim added that he thought President of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly Kim Yong Nam's September 10 statement that KJI had no health problems was an agreed talking point based on discussions among the most senior DPRK leadership, implying that the DPRK leadership wanted to preserve a sense of normalcy, which the ROKG agreed was the right approach for the time being.

14. (C) Kim added that it was critical that the ROKG and USG have close coordination at this "critical moment." He asked that the U.S. and ROK meet even more often in the coming weeks. On the margins of the meeting, MOU officials welcomed DAS Alex Arvizu's upcoming visit to Seoul and offered to set up an appropriate MOU meeting to discuss the DPRK.

South-North Relations

15. (C) In reply to Tong's question about the state of South-North relations, Kim said that government-level talks had halted, but that private exchanges and cooperation had actually increased compared to 2007: total trade was up 16 percent as of the end of August; 640 ROK companies were involved in activities with the North compared to 380 last year; and exchanges (i.e., travel between the two Koreas) had increased by 47 percent, with 120,000 South Koreans having visited the DPRK during January-August 2008. He noted that only several hundred North Koreans had visited the South during that period.

16. (C) Kim commented that because of the July 11 Mt. Kumgang shooting (and the North's lack of cooperation on the incident), ROK public opinion remained opposed to providing food aid to the DPRK. Even so, the ROKG continued to consider providing food aid through the World Food Program (WFP) or directly. He nodded at Tong's recommendation that the ROKG consider using the WFP model in the event that it decides to provide food aid, and that, if so, the ROKG seek

to apply the same high standards for monitoring that the USG had negotiated.

17. (C) Kim said that the ROKG would continue to provide non-HFO assistance in connection with the Six-Party Talks' Economy and Energy Cooperation Working Group.

CHINA WATCHING TOO

18. (C) In reply to Sedney's question about how the PRC viewed the current situation in the DPRK, Kim described China's approach as watchful and careful. China had made no public statements about the situation but one could be sure that senior leaders were talking about it, and that they would think ahead to establishing a communications channel with the new DPRK leadership, if it emerged.

19. (C) Kim reported that when the ROK Embassy in Beijing went to the PRC MFA to ask about China's views on the reports about KJI and its potential impact, the MFA diplomats claimed that they only knew what they read in the newspapers and refused to offer any analysis. Sedney noted that this type of non-answer was a common occurrence in dealing with the Chinese, observing that the Chinese reluctance to engage seriously with the ROK and the U.S. raised serious doubts about Chinese intentions. Kim concluded by saying that the ROKG and USG should keep on eye on China's approach to North Korea at this time.

MOFAT OFFICIALS ECHO CALM APPROACH

110. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) echoed Minister Kim's comments about the need for a measured response to speculation about KJI's health during September 11 meetings with Tong. Commended by Tong for the ROKG's calm demeanor thus far, Peninsula Peace Regime Bureau Director General Huh Chul emphasized the importance of maintaining a "business-as-usual" message. Noting that prolonged uncertainty about KJI's condition may delay opportunities to engage in dialogue with the DPRK or make progress in the 6PT, DG Huh also counseled patience.

¶11. (C) On the food aid and energy assistance fronts, MOFAT's "business-as-usual" approach appears to consist largely of waiting for signals from the DPRK. About food aid, for example, MOFAT Inter-Korean Policy Division Director Jin Gi-hoon confirmed that the ROKG had not decided whether to proceed with contributions in the absence of a request from Pyongyang. Suggesting that, if and when it does, the ROK insist on a monitoring and access protocol as robust as that negotiated for U.S. food aid, Director Tong informed Director Jin that copies of the protocol and letters of understanding had been provided to the ROK Embassy in Washington.

¶12. (C) Regarding energy assistance, Director General for North Korean Nuclear Affairs Hwang Joon-kook said there had been no contact with the North Koreans since they called off the planned bilateral August 22 meeting at Panmunjom. Delivery of 16,000 metric tons (t) of HFO-equivalent was going ahead as planned in September, DG Hwang said, and a further 11,000 t delivery was tentatively scheduled for October. Delivery of the ROK's final 44,000 t of HFO-equivalent assistance, however, would be contingent on further dialogue with the DPRK.

¶13. (C) DASD Sedney and Director Tong cleared this message.
VERSHBOW